DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 790 CS 206 494

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TITLE Existential Communication.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (64th, East Lansing, MI, August 8-11, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Content Analysis; *Existentialism; Philosophy; Social Influences; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Sartre (Jean Paul)

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the seminal work "Being and Nothingness," this paper explores the implications of the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre for the study of communication in society. The paper redefines communication from an existential point of view, explores some implications of this redefinition for the study of communication within the social setting, and reveals distinctions between this view and existing paradigms, including those of communication as cause, as pattern, as process, and as action. (FL)

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Existential Communication

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Presented to the Qualitative Studies Division,
Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention,
East Lansing, Mich., August, 1981.

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Communication has been viewed throughout most of the 20th century as an instrument aimed at accomplishing given social ends. This has lead to such definitions of communication as signal transfer, learning and social influence. These definitions, in turn, have lead researchers to a search for the causes and effects upon social order of communication behaviors.

In recent years, the growth of alternative approaches in psychology and in sociology has suggested with increasing urgency alternative ways of understanding the relationship of communication and society. These ways have been precipitated in part by the work of a group of new social theorists bound by common rejection of the assumptions of objectivistic, positivistic, dualistic approaches of empirical paradigms. The new theorists use phenomenological, ethnomethodological, hermeneutic and critical approaches. Their work has demonstrated the limitations of the empirical platform for the study of human experience and has revived the interest in alternatives.

This paper falls within this latter group. It is an exploration of the implications of the ideas of one philosopher for the study of communication in society. Specifically, the paper is a review Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal work Being and Nothingness.[1] The review attempts to redefine communication from an existential point of view, explore some implications of this redefinition for the study of communication within the social setting and discover distinctions between this view and existing paradigms, including those closest to it.

A Review of Being and Nothingness

Sartre's masterwork describes Being in human terms. It is an ontological study -- a study of the nature of reality and of things. Sartre argues that at the center of Being (reality) is two regions: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. Both are part of Being and reflect each other. Being-in-itself is simply what it is. It is nonconscious being. It is brute existence -- the phenomenon.

Being-in-itself becomes reality when it is revealed by Being-for-itself. Being-for-itself is human consciousness. It is the nihilation (or not) of Being-in-itself. It is freedom and free choice. Being-for-itself exists only as a concrete "nothingness" or a lack. It is the sense that it is more than physical objects that some specific aspect of itself has yet to be found. It seeks to be at one with Being-in-itself, but fails.

Each For-itself is the nihilation of a specific Being-in-itself. By bringing nothingness (lack) into the world, the For-itself stands in relation to Being and judges Being-in-itself through the sense that something more is

missing. It nihilates Being-in-itself and thereby reveals it.

This type of relation exists within the "presence" of the For-itself to the In-itself. This presence implies a (self) - awareness that is non-positional -- that does not make the For-itself an object of its awareness. Sartre argues that this presence requires that a nothing or lack be slipped between the For-itself and the In-itself. This is an ontological act made-to-be by Being. In attempting to discover itself, the For-itself is "pro-jected" from In-itself. This paradoxical force, called "presence" creates the state of Being which produces "modes of action."

The nihilation of Being-in-itself creates "reality" or makes the In-itself into concrete objects which exist and are therefore part of an individual past. As the For-itself negates the In-itself, it relegates the In-itself as an object to a past. Upon this past, the For-itself projects itself toward its future or "project." This is what Sartre calls the first "ekstasis" or mode of negation of the For-itself called "temporality."

Sartre argues that in the process of nihilating the In-itself, certain types of relation called trancendent nothings come to exist within being. Determination, quality, quantity, instrumentality, potentiality and knowledge are all types of relation that accomplish transcedence (nihilation that allows the For-itself to move on towards its future).

Sartre describes two other "ekstases." The first is the "Act of Reflection." In the act of reflection, the For-itself turns its nihilation upon itself. This nihilation causes the For-itself to be separated from itself creating an internal modification of consciousness that disperses it into temporality. The presence of the For-itself to the For-itself is thus an internal modification of the For-itself or another dimension of the For-itself's original nihilation of the In-itself.

The third ekstasis that Sartre describes is the For-others. Sartre argues that though "the Look" of others I come to realize that my body provides an exterior of myself which is an In-itself for others. This allows me to become an object or "thing" for the other's For-itself. This realization that the other may transcend my transcending -- that my freedom is transcended by the other's freedom -- allows me to recognize the other as a For-itself like myself. I attempt to grasp the other as myself, but can never be at one with the other since the other can transcend my transcending. This leads to a failure to be identified with the other and a renewal of nihilation which establishes the For-itself.

Sartre describes several "concrete relations with others" that represent the attempt of the For-itself to assimilate the other's freedom into its own

freedom. These include such relations as love, language, masochism, in- 3
difference, desire, hate, sadism, and the experience of "us." These relations are brought to be by the presence of the For-itself with the other.

It is important here to note Sartre's unique view of language for it disagrees with some interpretations of the existential view of language that make existential approaches appear more compatible with other theoretical approaches.[2] Sartre argues that concrete relations with others do not simply presuppose language, but "rather that they are language or, if you prefer, a fundamental mode of language.. Language is not a phenomenon added on to being-for-others. It is originally being-for-others: it is the fact that a subjectivity experiences itself as an object for the Other"[3] (emphasis his). Sartre argues that it is not necessary to invent language because it is a given in the intersubjectivity of the For-others. In the very recognition of the Other, language is implicit. "I am language," Sartre says. "By the sole fact that whatever I may do, my acts freely conceived and executed, my projects launched toward my possibilities have outside of them a meaning which escapes me and which I experience."[4] And Sartre goes on to quote approvingly a formulation of Heidegger: "I am what I say."[5] He also adds: "Of course by language we mean all the phenomena of expression and not the articulated word, which is a derived and secondary mode whose appearance can be made the object of an historical study.[6]

It is plain from what Sartre says that he considers language to be more than verbal or even non-verbal communication. He considers it to be a mode of concrete relations with the Other. He says that language arises as "the condition of my being" within which I confront the Other.[7]

Implications for Communication

Sartre provides a comprehensive ontology upon which to build a new concept of communication. He also endorses in part and uses in Being and Nothingness the methodology of the Phenomenologists providing a practical method for conducting communication research from this perspective. He thus provides the grounding for a fundamentally new theory of communication.

Sartre's scheme argues that human consciousness acts continuously to establish or find itself. In order to do this, the human consciousness makes itself "present" to in-itself (essentially physical substance). It does this by projecting itself or acting toward its future.

Sartre describes three kinds of action: trancedence, reflection and concrete relations. Trancedence creates physical substance, reflection creates (self) - awareness and concrete relations create relations with other For-itselfes.

The types of action are produced and altered by the state (or "condition") of Being generated by the force of the presence of the For-itself to the In-itself. They include several specific "modes of action" such as language, know-

ledge and what is often called "information." These modes of action or behaviors have been shown by Sartre to have a common origin: the state of Being within which the For-itself is in juxtaposition with In-itself (presence) thereby creating human reality and the regions of Being.

It is this state of Being which I believe might usefully be identified as communication. From it flow behaviors (modes of action including transcendent nothings and concrete relations) now commonly identified by other paradigms for purposes of manipulation as communication behaviors, content, system, social force, process, and even symbolic activity.

Communication may thus be redefined. It is not an instrument of physical variable, history, or human cognition. It is a state of being within which human reality is created or altered. The study of communication should properly be the quality of that state and its relationship with modes of action. As the quality of the communication state changes, the specific relations among aspects of Being change and human reality is profoundly altered.

Communication is a precognitive condition of Being that results in a pattern of relations among the aspects of Being. This condition or state results in the specific relations, including knowledge, that other paradigms mistakenly identify as the cause of human motivation.[8] Communication preceeds rather than becoming an instrument of such realtions.

A redefinition of the concept of communication along these lines produces several specific implications for our study of communication.

Implicit in Sartre's view is a communication state that is continuous and an integral part of life itself. Communication is non-linear and of continuous fabric. The state changes as the project changes, but has no beginning and no end.

The term communication behavior is obviated by this concept of communication. Communication behavior includes all behavior. All behavior reflects the fundamental state of communication and no behavior may be said to not be derived from the state of communication. Behavior becomes a means of examing the communication state, for it is derived from it.

Sartre has pointed out that the Other may transcend all specific relations including transcedent nothings, reflection and concrete relations. All exteriorizations of trancedence and other specific relations may become language. However, not all behavior is language. Behavior which is not exteriorized or made object for the Other is not language. This view speaks directly to the debate over "intent" in studies of non-verbal communication. Behaviors which are experienced as exterior are concrete relations. Behaviors which are not experienced as exterior are trancedent or reflexive but are not language.

All behavior is thus derivitive of communication, but not all behavior is language. And language does not exhaust the relevance of other behavior for the study of communication. The center of the study of communication shifts from the study of language as the primary method to the study of all behaviors as derived relations dependent upon the state of communication.

The study of language and indeed of all behavior shifts from a search for the causative forces influencing or manipulating the instrument of communication, to the primordial, precognitive state from which they are derived. The study of the communication state is a study of the For-itself's attempt to found itself and the project continuously generated upon a constantly rejuvinated past.

Thus, whatever "variable" is studied is really a pattern of relations generated within the encounter of the For-itself with the In-itself. Realities become patterns of relations among other realities sustained through the escape of the For-itself from the In-itself generating its past.

This means that the objects or variables assumed to be influencing the actions of the individual are only patterns maintained through the future project of the For-itself. As this project shifts, the state of communication shifts and the behaviors flowing from that state shift, including the language behaviors. To search for cause among physical or social objects is to search for cause among patterns created by the consciousness supposedly affected. This clearly would create a teological pattern of causation.

But, likewise, to examine language as the manifestation of an individual's cognitive structures, would be to examine two derived modes of action both dependent upon an earlier precognitive structure (the communication state).

The implication of Sartre's philosophy is to view communication as a precognitive state from which flow all ways of objectifying the world, ways of viewing one' self and ways of relating to others. The exteriors of those relations are language. Secondary language is symbols of those exteriors. In all cases, it is the patterns of relations established precognitively that is the center of interest.

Sartre's view delineates a distinction among the structures of being, a distinction among types of behavior, the importance of the relationship of behavior to patterns or relations that create objects, and a distinction among the relationships of behavior to the communication state and to future project.

The existential approach to the study of communication suggests not only an alternative to the mechanistic models that have dominated thinking during the 20th century but also an alternative to more modern theories which view communication as an instrument of social force, pattern, history or a human cognitive structure.

It thus creates unique implications that differ in significant ways from the approaches of paradigms extant.

The Paradigms Extant

The major paradigms of social theory may be grouped into four streams of thought: those that view communication as an instrument of specifiable, observable (usually physical) cause; those that view it as pattern, those that view it as process; and those that view it as action.[9] Some of these approaches still might be considered by some to be pre-paradigmatic.[10] Nevertheless, they each have a vocal group of supporters.

Communication as Cause

The first group of theorists have looked at communication primarily as an instrument or tool for the manipulation of physical variables and through them of individual behavior within society.

The behaviorists, for example, have defined communication largely as learning. David Berlo acknowledged as much in 1960 when he wrote, "We have discussed two models, one of communication and the other of learning...It can be argued that the relationship extends beyond this, and that the model of learning is itself similar or equivalent to the model of communication."[11]

The principles of learning thus becomes the principles of communication and the means by which the communicator attempts to communicate.[12] Communication becomes the tool to manipulate learning. By using the principles of learning, politicians, advertisers, and others are thought to be able to manipulate society using communication to teach individuals to respond in specified ways to physical stimuli.

Similarly, the information theorists argue that through the manipulation of signals sent along communication chains, information can cause receivers of communication messages to reach corresponding physical states with those of the sender.[13] This "cybernetic" approach sees information as a means of getting compliance from the social environment through the interfacing of physical systems such that each functions to alter the adjoining system resulting in a specified outcome at the end of the communication chain.

The limitation of such materialistic approaches is accounting for subjective human experience. The structural-functional approaches of Durkheim and Weber attempted to explain subjective human experience by viewing human behavior as determined by causal independent variables such as values objectively observed using principles developed by the logical positivists.[14] The concept of communication was not significantly altered. Communication continued to be an instrument of encounter for independent and dependent variables along a plane of causation.

Sartre's existential approach offers a clear alternative to these instrumental approaches. Communication is viewed as a state of Being producing modes of action. Thus, it is not manipulatable to outside individuals and cannot be viewed as an instrument for the manipulaiton of others.

Communication as Pattern

The second major stream of thought is reflected in an attempt at developing an alternative to the classical mechanistic approach by a group of theories called systems approaches. These have been of particular importance in organizational communication.[15] These approaches examine changing relationships among aspects of a system and seek to understand, predict, control and explain phenomena of communication. The approach seeks "a set of variables together with rules of transformation which define the relations among the variables."[16] Communication is assumed to follow circular, repeating patterns of change in the variables that define it and to be stochastic or predictable.[17]

From an existential point of view, such systemic approaches fail completely to take into account the contribution of human consciousness to the structure of reality and meaning. Sartre would argue that the basis of human reality is the consciousness that creates Being. To fail to structure all other aspects of Being around it is to fail to understand human reality.

Communication as Process

The symbolic interactionists try to reintroduce an active will into the relationship between independent and dependent variables. They follow the lead of William James, John Dewey and George Hurbert Mead,[18] and place symbolic behavior at the center of social interaction and at the foundation of social behavior. Mead argued that the self, mind and thereby society all are founded upon the use of role-playing, of significant symbol and the consequent possibility of ascertaining of intention. Communication became the process of developing self-concept through role playing and the ascertaining of intention, thus allowing shared perspective and social action. It became an instrument of social influence and a tool for the manipulation of self-concept and of the role of the individual in society.

Recent symbolic interactionists have concentrated research on the symbols that play such a critical role in the evolution of self-concept and on a study of those symbols as indicative of self-concept and the presentation of the self to others.

Another recent alternative following loosely from Mead but emphasizing verbal and non-verbal representations of individual constructions of society is the development of what is called "rules theory."[19] The rules theorist argues that actions are governed by rules instead of laws and that communication function:

to regulate consensus in order to coordinate human behavior by adapting rules to accomplish specific cooperative tasks. "Necessity is achieved...in the rules perspective by locating tasks which generate standardized usages and episodes with practical necessity."[20] Communication is the method for constructing social action according to "rules." Communication is seen as an instrument of social control by individual construct instead of by physicalistic variables which lie outside the control of human agreement.

The view of communication as process shares more common ground with the existential view than previous paradigms. The uniqueness of individual self-concept, the pervasiveness of communication, and the public representation of private experience all are compatible with concerns of existentialism. But for the existentialist, individual self-concept is not developed through an interplay with social environment and public representation is not created with practical necessity in order to construct social action and cooperative behavior. Communication is not a bridge across which individual and public may join hands.

Instead, the individual is locked into a never-ending struggle to find completeness or his own foundation. In the process he finds a unique world produced through his own struggle. His search shows its exterior to a public of Others who objectify it. Public representation is an inescapable struggle with freedom--one's own and the Other's. All behavior has the potential to be language.

Communication as Action

The emphasis by the symbolic interactionists and rules theorists on symbolic behavior bears resemblence to the work of other modern theorists seeking alternatives to the mechanistic ideal. These theorists have redefined society and the role of communication along lines emphasizing symbolic behavior as the unit of analysis for understanding human motivation.

For example, Kenneth Burke has concentrated on the motives of individuals in society.[21] He considers communication to be symbolic activity and all thought and language to be action. Those who have followed his approach use language as the unit of analysis and try to discover the relationships (or ratios) among several "moments" in a series of dramatistic dialectics assumed to lie at the center of human motivation. Burke and his followers place emphasis upon "action" instead of "movement" in human behavior. Human motivation is restored to the center of human behavior replacing physicalistic variables. Communication becomes the symbolic activity reflecting such motivation and its role in society is co serve as the mode of action for working out human motivation.[22]

A second approach based upon human motivation and one often viewed as inextricably intertwined with that of the existentialists,[23] is the approach of the phenomenologists.[24] These theorists have followed the work of Edmund Husserl[25] in trying to understand how man experiences the world and himself. Conscious, meaningful, intentional experience is the focus of their work. They emphasize conscious, cognitive, symbolically meaningful aspects of human experience. They view communication as the manifestation of the "transcedental ego" and its experience of the world.

The outcome of this approach can be seen in the work of Alfred Schutz[26] or of Berger and Luckmann.[27] These theorists emphasize symbolic typifications or highly shared meaningful representations of reflective expereince. Only such reflective (intentional) experience is considered meaningful. The typifications, for Berger and Luckmann, become social presentations or roles.

Two other streams of research approach have come out of this perspective: the ethnomethodologists and hermeneutic approaches.

The ethnomethodologists[28] emphasize highly symbolic forms of human experience. Ethnomethodology is fundamentally a study of "accounts" in everyday social life, especially of the ways in which individuals show their behavior to be accountable to others in society. They attempt to discover the "indexicality" of the situation or the way it is construed by the individual within that situation. Communication is viewed as the means by which the individual makes public his unique experience of the phenomena in a particular situation. Communication becomes an account of the individual's cognition or construction of the situation.

The hermeneutical approach[29] views the situation as bound by context. The context that constrains the situation is hermeneutical or symbolic in nature. Thus, symbolic representations by the individual reveal the context of the situation for that individual and the approach of this group of researchers is to try to discover the act of interpretation or "making sense of" of the individual through the symbolic representations he makes of the situation.

The phenomenological approaches represent the closest relatives of the existential approach developing within sociology and communication. However, the emphasis upon symbolic representation of epistemic context is too narrow a focus for the existential theorists who want rather to explore precognitive or pre-epistemic experience.[30] They emphasize that the cognitive structures which symbolic activity is assumed to reflect are themselves post-existential representations of precognitive experience. For the existentialist, symbolic representations, do not constitute communication, but are only one manifestation of a more fundamental State of Being, what I would call the communication state.

Some Implications

The existential approach implies a number of research issues. Sartre has outlined several types of concrete relations. Communication studies already extant suggest other possible relations.[31]

Several conditions of the state of communication seem to suggest themselves.[32] If the quality of the state of communication alters concrete relations, an examination of concrete relations may be assumed to suggest details about the quality of the state of communication.

Phenomenologist Don Ihde has found profound experiential distinctions between face to face communication and mediated communication.[33] The For-itself projects differently before an Other than before In-itself. This suggests that Ihde's findings follow from the potential for exteriorization of behavior typical in face to face encounters and missing in mediated communication.

In a similar way, aberrant behavior such as hate and violence are viewed by Sartre as concrete relations or relations to establish freedom in the face of helplessness before another's freedom. It can be argued both that media permit non-exteriorized trancedence and thus total freedom and yet the ultimate "us" experience and thus absolute bondage. This paradox suggests the need for a broad examination of mediated trancedence from the existential perspective. The quality of the communication state under such presence remains unexplored.

ENDNOTES

[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York. Simon and Schuster Pocket Books, 1956).

[2]See, for example, Karlyn Lohrs Campbell, "The Rhetorical Implications of the Axiology of Jean Paul Sartre," Western Speech 35 (Summer, 1971), 155-160.

[3]Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 485.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 486.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]For example, see Michael J. Hyde's account of the work of Jacques Lacan: "On the Reifying Tendency and the Liberating Functions of Speech," Eros 7:2 (1980), 54-82.

[9]For approaches to another stream of thought, communication as socio-historical force, see Harold Innis, The Bias of Communication (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); "The Living McLuhan," The Journal of Communication, XXXI:3 (Summer, 1981), 116-200; or John O'Neill, Sociology as a Skin Trade (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972).

[10]Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Vol. 2, No. 2 of Unity of Science, ed. by Otto Neurath, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1970).

[11]David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 99.

[12]For a discussion of some of the difficulties in adapting this paradigm specifically to a learning situation using mediated communication, see Nathan MacCoby and David G. Markle, "Communication and Learning," in Handbook of Communication, ed. by Ithiel de Sola Pool, et. al., (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), pp. 153-173.

[13]See Wilbur Schramm, "Information Theory and Mass Communication, Journalism Quarterly, XXXII (Spring, 1955), 131-146, for a discussion of the application of information theory to communication.

[14]To see this argument made, see Jack D. Douglas and John M. Johnson, Existential Sociology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 6-7.

[15]For a discussion of system theory and the study of communication, see Peter R. Monge, "Theory Construction in the Study of Communication: The System Paradigm," The Journal of Communication, XXIII:1 (March, 1973), 5-16. For a review of its particular importance in organizational communication theory, see W. Charles Redding, "Organizational Communication and Ideology: An Overview," in Communication Yearbook 3, ed. by Dan Nimmo, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-International Communication Association, 1979), pp. 309-341.

[16]Monge, "Theory Construction," p. 10.

[17]See, for example, B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication (New York: MacMillan, 1978), pp. 194-233.

[18]The seminal work in this area is George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), but an informative reader which explores both of the major schools flowing from Mead's thought is Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, eds., Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon 1967).

[19]D.P. Cushman and W. Barnett Pearce, "Generality and Necessity in Three Types of Human Communication Theory--Special Attention to Rules Theory," in Communication Yearbook I, ed. by Brent D. Ruben, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-International Communication Association, 1977), pp. 173-182.

[20]Ibid., p. 179.

[21]Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1945). For a broader discussion of where Burke's ideas have lead, see Arthur P. Bochner and Dorthy Lenk Krueger, "Interpersonal Communication Theory and Research: An Overview of Inscrutable Epistemologies and Muddled Concepts," in Communication Yearbook 3, ed. by Dan Nimmo, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-International Communication Association, 1979), pp. 197-211.

[22]For just one example of how this is worked out in research, see David G. Lee, William C. Johnson, and J. Michelle Beld, "The Rhetorical Challenge of the Carter Transition: To Build a Governing Majority," in Communication Yearbook 3, ed. by Dan Nimmo, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction-International Communication Association, 1979), pp. 475-489.

[23]See, for example, the grouping of major "platforms" in John Sutherland, A General Systems Philosophy for the Social and Behavioral Sciences (New York: George Braziller, 1973), p. 59f.

[24]For example Alfred Schutz, Collected Papers (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962), Alfred Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), or Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

[25]Edmund Husserl, Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, trans. by W.R. Gibson, (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

[26]Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World.

[27]Berger and Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality.

[28]Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967).

[29]Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen But Unobserved Relationship," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 65 (1979), 347-363.

[30]Douglas and Johnson, Existential Sociology, pp. 8-11 and 153-173.

[31]For an example of one of these, see Michael J. Hyde, "The Experience of Anxiety: A Phenomenological Investigation," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66 (1980), 140-154.

[32]The work of the cognitive dissonance theorists and many others shows clearly that persons are more persuasable at some times than at others. One can speculate that as the quality of the communication state changes, persuasibility changes. In fact, the communication state may change in several ways producing varying behavioral patterns: A list of such qualities might include such things as receptive qualities, manipulative qualities, creative qualities, reordering qualities, inquisitive qualities and others.

[33]Don Ihde, Technics and Praxis (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979). See also Hanno Hardt, "The Dilemma of Mass Communication: An Existential Point of View," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 5(Summer, 1972), 175-187.